

# AN EARLY CRITIQUE OF INTERNATIONAL MODERNISM IN THE ANATOLIAN CONTEXT

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## Abstract

*The METU Lodgings Project is located in Ankara, which was established as the Modernist capital of Turkey in 1923. Designed by an architect couple, Altuğ and Behruz Çinici, this unique project reflects with subtle details the "internationality" of its architecture and provides a regional interpretation of Modernity through Anatolian culture. METU Lodgings were designed in pursuit of the idea(l) of Modern City Planning. Due to the adaptation of the concepts developed during the first CIAM meetings in general and the application of the perfect grid as a mediator for site planning in particular, this project can be considered as a distinct product of Modern Architecture. The METU Lodgings are unique not only as an outstanding example of Modern Architecture but also as an early critique of the International Style. The ease in the subtle inclinations of the roofs, the thick brick load bearing walls framing large glass surfaces and the meticulously altered grid of the site layout were a declaration of a unique architecture that was clearly willing to go beyond the "tropes" of Modernism. Therefore, this study focuses on the established demarcation between modern versus traditional, public versus private, transparent versus opaque, pitched versus flat that was later blurred in the competent juxtaposition of these "binary oppositions".*

**Keywords:** Housing, Privacy, Modern Architecture, International Style, Grid

Located in the university campus and surrounded by a planted forest, the METU Lodgings project is a hidden, unique and unusual example of Modern Architecture in Turkey. Designed by an architect couple, Altuğ and Behruz Çinici, the project reflects with subtle details the "internationality" of its architecture and provides a regional interpretation of Modernity expressed through Turkish architectural culture. In the late 1950s the METU Campus was designed and executed following the idea(l)s of Modern City Planning. Due to the adaptation of the concepts developed during the first CIAM meetings in general and the application of the perfect grid as a mediator for site planning in particular, the campus can

be considered a distinct product of Modern Architecture.<sup>1</sup> (Savaş, van der Meij, 2018)

With its flat roofs, band windows, exposed concrete and whitewashed surfaces, it represents an emblematic reflection of the 1930s European Modernism learned third-hand from its American predecessors. Its architecture is, in its own particular way, a physical manifestation of everything the International Style claimed to profess.

The METU Lodgings are unique not only as an example of Modern Architecture, but also as an early critique of the International Style. If the early architecture of the campus was a stylistic choice, the METU Lodgings project, developed in the second half of the 1960s, was its daring criticism. This 'project' was a UN - UPENN collaborative enterprise that was purposefully planned to achieve a particular goal. It was initiated under the guidance of a United Nations program in support of training in public administration. On the 5th of September 1951, a legal agreement was signed by the United Nations and the 28-year-old Turkish Government authorizing Charles Abrams (1902-1970) to conduct research on housing and city planning in Turkey. Following his one-year research in Turkey in 1955, Abrams wrote a report suggesting the establishment of a Graduate school for Architecture and City Planning in Ankara. Approved by the government, the Minister of Education put this report into application. (Sargin, Savaş, 2013) Holmes Perkins, the head of the Department of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, was invited to supervise the structural organization of the school, its program and its academic mission. While working on this project, Perkins invited experts such as Thomas Godfrey and Marvin Sevely to teach and administer the school, which was officially established in 1956. While working on the curriculum, these architects started developing different urban schemes and architectural proposals for the design of the future institution. Instead of their proposals, a competition winning project from a young Turkish architect couple was chosen. Nevertheless, the main idea behind the design of the overall campus and the staff housing remained the same. This large-scale

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<sup>1</sup> CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*) was the name of a series of international conferences on modern architecture and urban planning, organized between 1928 and 1959.

housing project would not only accommodate the university's teaching and administrative staff but also be a 'model' for further housing developments in the country. The intention was for the site to reach the scale of a small town including a primary and a middle school within its premises. Only 28 houses of this original housing project were completed. The academic occupants of the first 18 houses moved in during the summer of 1969. The second stage was completed seven years later. The executed part of the METU housing project was a masterpiece, not only because it was well designed and meticulously built, but also because the architects knew what Modern Architecture was all about, and what a 'home' could not be. The maintenance of the flat roofs and large glass surfaces would be a challenge in Ankara's harsh climate, while appreciating the minimalist Modernist interiors, white plaster surfaces, glass brick separators, and exposed concrete walls would be rather difficult for the university staff coming from different nationalities, backgrounds and age groups.

The first impression of the METU Lodgings is that the project was brilliantly misplaced. If nothing else, the houses look very "domestic" compared to the rather "brute-cubist" architecture of the rest of the campus. At first glance, they are pitched roof, red brick, North European row houses. A formal analysis, however, indicates otherwise and shows that the architects were clearly refusing such valiant or easy references. An exploration of the conditions that led to the design and construction of the academic housing at the METU campus shows that they are unique in their land organization, architectural design, and material details. The 'Row house' as a housing type evokes either the 19<sup>th</sup> century worker's cottages or the emerging petit bourgeois neighbourhoods in industrialized countries. Marginalized during the Industrial Revolution and still a developing country, Turkey has no precedents of this type. The local people in Anatolia first lived in traditional houses that were developed according to the local values of the different regions, then moved to single standing five storey apartment blocks. As a result, the local people saw very few examples of row houses. Therefore, while the METU Lodgings are composed of linearly attached cubical units, yet it is not possible to call them 'row houses' in the conventional

sense of the term. They represent distinctive properties that could only be conceptualized in their geographical and historical settings.

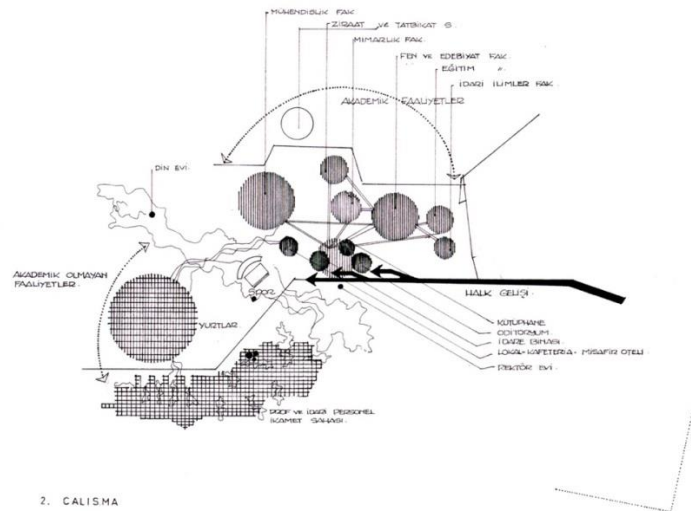
The construction of these houses started in August of 1968 and when they were completed a year later, they were the only man-made objects in the vicinity. The site selected for their construction was bare land, with almost no sign of spatial identity, which could be interpreted as the ideal ground, (a zero point/*tabula rasa*) for the flourishing of a 'new' architecture. Indeed, the 1/5000 scale site plan of the campus presents an abstract, 'rational' order guided by invisible orthogonal guide lines, a grid of which there are traces left particularly in the housing. (Figure 1)



**Figure 1.** The 1/5000 scale site plan of the METU Campus with the orthogonal grid indicated around the housing clusters. *Salt Research, Altuğ-Behrüz Çinici Archive*

The abstract curves of the topography lines, the indication of educational and dwelling units with rectangular prisms, the sharp corners of the traffic roads and pedestrian paths suggest a strong aspiration for Modernism. Among other modes of architectural representation, Çinici Architects favoured the orthographic set to

express and communicate their ideas. Architectural historiography has long been established on the assumption that drawings are the primary referent for the interpretation of the architects' intentions. Besides being projections to create images for the future buildings, they have been interpreted as documents giving historical information. (Evans, 1997) This rather technical mode of representation has been identified with Modern Architecture to exceed its practical medium of implementation. The inherent neutrality, or in better terms, 'objectivity' of this mode has been interpreted in different ways. (Türkay, 2011) In this particular case, the hand drawn orthographic set that includes the plan, section and elevation drawings has been conceived as the main source of information to understand the material and aesthetic choices made by the architects. Indeed, their intentions can be traced in the line quality, hatching technique, locations of the section lines, depiction of different materials and particularly in the drawing notes. The terminology used to describe certain architectural elements and the hand-written notes on the drawings are also evidence of the architects' intentions to challenge the abstract mapping of the 'site plan'. The campus plan was divided into functional zones based on the design decisions given in a bubble diagram. (Figure 2)



**Figure 2.** The bubble diagram of the campus plan, divided into functional zones, based on the walking distances between the different functions. *Salt Research, Altuğ-Behrüz Çinici Archive*

Educational units, administrative buildings, sports facilities, dormitories and staff housing were located based on the walking distances between these different functions. Yet, in fact, the site was not at all flat and retained a very complex topography. (Figure 3)



**Figure 3.** General view of the houses and the transformation of the landscape

Placing the linear clusters of 'L' shaped dwelling units on this topography was the first step taken towards the strong sense of belonging to the land, responding to the 'context'.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the two-dimensional mapping of the site plan, the section drawings illustrate the three-dimensional organization of the houses on the site that was mainly due to the sharp level differences in the south-north direction and the smooth slope of the topography inclining towards the west. Each unit was placed in relation to the other, according to the orientation towards the sun, and the formation of the land. The meticulous placement of

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<sup>2</sup> 'L shape plan', from an interview with Aydan Balamir in 2016, Ankara.



housing units on the site and the slight protrusions and recessions they make, generated zigzag patterns, which helped create semi-private gardens and courtyards to make these houses almost 'site-specific'. Moreover, the architects borrowed terms from traditional architecture to label these well-defined open spaces as '*taşlık*' or '*avlu*', which mean paved courtyard and yard in English.<sup>3</sup> In traditional architecture, local and climatic conditions including local materials and construction techniques helped the formation of these courtyards. Household privacy required a hierarchical organization of spaces from the street to the entrance. Using traditional terminology to name these semi-private yards '*taşlık*' created a duality. That is to say that the land itself, with its material and symbolic characteristics was creating a 'context', and as such, becoming one of the main sources of inspiration for the architects. (Bozdoğan, 2001)



**Figure 4.** The east façade of the houses

A close analysis of the drawings of the east and west façades of the houses presents another set of dichotomies. The east façade is illustrated with large

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<sup>3</sup> From an interview with Altuğ and Behruz Çinici in 2006, Ankara.

glass openings to allow the morning sun to penetrate into the bedrooms in the morning and narrow band windows to provide light and privacy to the bathroom. The exposed concrete balustrade and the ceiling project from the white plaster surface of this exterior wall to form a balcony. (Figure 4)

What challenges this otherwise highly Modernist approach is the application of the dark brown wooden elements that are used to frame and thus to divide the band windows into equal parts. Timber frame and infill is a traditional construction technique in Turkey. Yet half of this exterior wall flows in the air and acts like a bridge to reject the load bearing quality of the lath and plaster wall-making system known as '*bağdadi*' in Turkish. As the exposed concrete floor of the master bedroom is the main load bearing element, the timber framing remains as an ornament cladded on the surface of the white plaster wall. *Kafes* is another local term used by the architects to refer to the wooden mesh inspired by traditional residential architecture. Rather than acting as a *brise soleil*, this wooden lattice is used to provide visual privacy, an influence from the conventions of earlier houses remaining in Anatolia.

In contrast with the whitewashed and exposed concrete surface of the east façade, the west façade is made out of brick and mortar. Moreover, the dark brown timber frames, wide eaves, and particularly the exposed rafters under these eaves, all emphasise the existence of an overall guidance of traditional elements in the architects' unique approach. Therefore, the contrast between the east and west façades is an indication of not only a strong sense of sun orientation and functional alteration, but also the aesthetic choices of the architects. The main architectural element on this façade, a relatively large bay window ornamented with traditional brick and wooden corbelling, is further evidence of this contextual attitude. The bay window, or '*cumba*' as it is called in Anatolia, protrudes towards the streets from the main façades of the traditional houses. While increasing the amount of natural light, it also provides an in-between space between the outside and inside to adjust the domestic privacy.

A very subtle juxtaposition of the familiar elements of Modern Architecture with regional motives is epitomised in the design of a little balcony on the upper floor

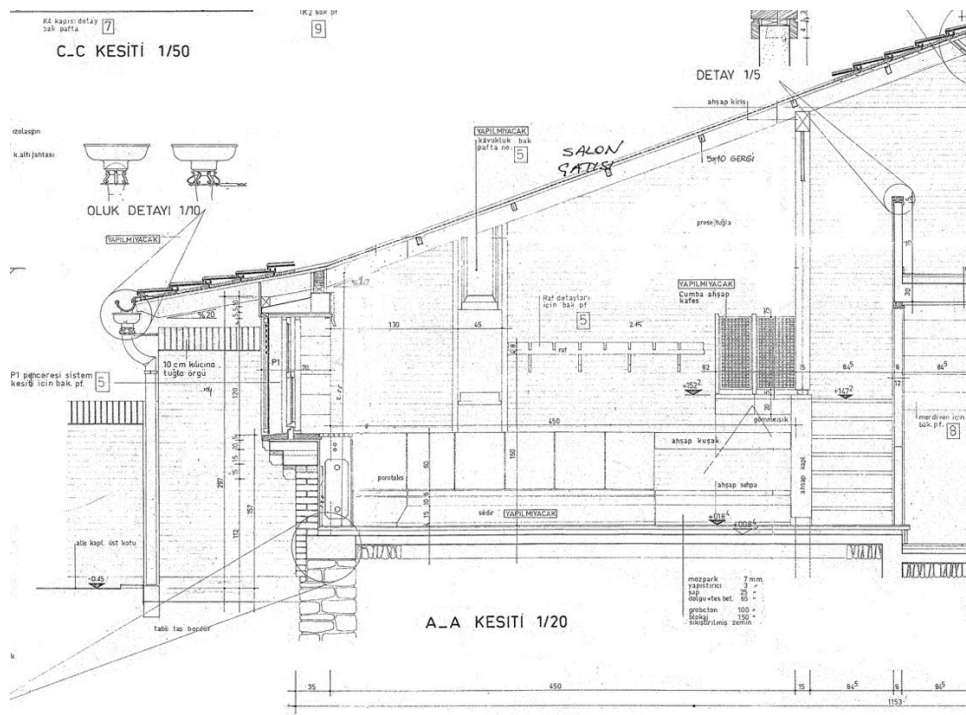


of the west façade. Inspired by the dimensions and the materials of its Modern precedents, this balcony is made out of a thick exposed concrete slab projecting from the white painted flat surface of the exterior wall. However, the detail drawings of this balcony show that the architects thought of veiling its front façade with another wooden lattice. As the balcony was very small and located on the first floor, the use of *kafes* here was for more symbolic reasons than functional requirements of privacy. In a similar manner, the inclined roofing on the top suggested another juxtaposition of binary oppositions, pitched versus flat, public versus private, traditional versus Modern.

Finishing the north façade with a homogenous yellow brick wall yet making the south façade transparent with large glass sliding doors is another contrast created by the architects. Brick is a local material used extensively in Anatolia. Yellow, on the other hand, is quite an unusual colour for this region. Another unusual aspect of this façade is the decoration of each brick with vertical flutes. These flutes alternate on the wall to produce almost an ornamented surface. The south façade contains the main entrance door and the sliding openings of the living room. The angle brackets at the corners of the large glass surfaces of the sliding doors, the very narrow, yellow and textured band window placed perpendicular to them, the entrance door made out of wood and reinforced glass, the cast iron lighting fixture and the wooden mail box, they all react to the otherwise minimalist approach presented on this flat surface.

The inclination of the roof towards east and west, reads more like a break and a tilt of a flat surface, rather than a traditional pitched roof. In the interior of the house, the breaking point of the roof marks the coexistence of two different design approaches. Above the living room, the inclined surface is visible and creates a double storey ceiling, ornamented with load bearing timber elements painted dark brown and white. Above the kitchen, bedrooms and the bathroom, it transforms into a white washed flat surface. Thus, the roof divides the interior into two distinctive parts. One step level difference between the living and dining rooms enhances this division of space. Otherwise, the house is a perfect example of an 'open plan' scheme. Spaces flow into one another without any visual or physical obstacle. The large glass surfaces and openings on the east,

west and south façades blur the borders between the inside and outside, private and public. Only the interior surface of the north façade contradicts this transparency. The homogeneous brick surface duplicates itself in the interior and expands to the dining room wall with a wooden wainscoting. The detail drawing of this interior façade illustrates a set of wooden built-in furniture that was never built yet requires further analysis. (Figure 5)



**Figure 5.** The detailed drawing of the interior façade illustrating the locations of the traditional architectural elements: *kavukluk*, *sedir*, *cumba* and *kafes*. METU, Altuğ-Behruz Çinici Archive

Starting from the left, '*kavukluk*', '*sedir*', '*cumba*' and '*kafes*' refer to four traditional household items, which are very unusual to find in a modern house in the 1960s. *Kavukluk* is an ornamented shelf installed on the walls to hold the *turban*, which used to be the traditional headdress in the Ottoman period. A *Sedir* is traditional long and soft seat with a back and usually arms, and *cumba* and *kafes* in this case refer to the landing of the staircase protruding towards

the living room. The project note indicating the fact that 'they were not meant to be built' leaves their architectural interpretation incomplete and their functional adjustments unknown. The square sectioned single column placed meticulously on a sphere, on the other hand, is the only built evidence of this enigmatic approach. It is hard to find the traces of a two-dimensional capital and spherical base in the traditional architecture of the region. As it is not visible and the detail drawings do not give any clue about its construction details, the way this column transfers the load from roof to the ground remains another mystery.

Neither the meticulous architectural drawings nor the later explanations of the architects in various interviews are sufficient enough to understand the real motives behind the proposal of the traditional elements in these Modern houses. The success of an architectural project is measured in terms of material qualities, user satisfaction and the efficiency of its infrastructural facilities; however, the METU Lodgings project was deemed important for another reason, being anticipated to become a model for similar "Modernist" undertakings in the region in the future. Due to the adaptation of the concepts developed during the first CIAM meetings in general and the application the perfect grid as a mediator for site planning in particular, the campus can be considered a distinct product of Modern Architecture. This project was designed and executed following the idea(l)s of Modern city planning and urban design defined in CIAM and has been considered a successful Modernist project and achievement in experimental planning history. The houses, on the other hand, are exceptional not only as a very successful example of Modern Architecture, but also as an early critique of the International Style. The ease in the subtle inclinations of the roofs, the thick brick load bearing walls framing large glass surfaces and the meticulously altered grid of the site layout were a declaration of a unique architecture that was clearly willing to go beyond the "tropes" of Modernism. (Goldhagen, 2005) The established demarcation between modern versus traditional, public versus private, transparent versus opaque, pitched versus flat was blurred in the competent juxtaposition of these "binary oppositions".

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